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Being Lost

Thania Hernandez

As a child, my mother told me that if I always listened to those in charge, I could avoid getting lost.

As far as I knew back then, this made sense. When we were still living with my grandparents, I knew that if I finished all my meals, remained polite towards everyone, and went to bed on time, Mom and I could spend time together in the evenings, reading books or watching my favorite cartoons after she'd spent long hours at work.

However, if I did not follow these orders, my evenings were spent alone. I would have to keep the lights off, remain under my thick purple bed sheets, and listen to all those loud, violent words which passed off as conversation between Mom and my grandparents. I could always hear Mom telling them not to take out all their anger at her towards me, because I was just a child and kids always tended to act up. Then my grandparents accused her of already passing on her rebellious ways to me, saying that I was acting exactly as she did when she was my age. If they weren't there to properly discipline me, then my future was sure to be like hers: a deadbeat woman with no husband to bring up her child.

As a young child, having to listen to all that while alone in the darkness was what it meant to be lost. We didn't go out to malls very often due to our lack of money, so there wasn't much chance of getting left behind due to staring at some Barbie doll I wanted to take home in the toy store. Mom also tended to avoid taking me to parks, probably because of all the happy parents and children whom you found on every corner, so staying behind due to refusing to say goodbye to playmates was very unlikely. Instead, getting lost was not knowing when Mom would get away from that ferocious arguing, and wondering if doing something differently, like finishing up all my dinner, not talking back, or even picking up the only toy I left on the living room floor, would have kept her out of trouble.

Then, at the age of seven, Mom thought she found the answer to our problems. She'd met a man around her age named Bill at work, who started taking her out to eat and giving her small presents at random times. After this had been going on for several months, he invited Mom to come live with him in his new apartment. As far as Mom knew at the time, this man was going to save us from all the years of pain we'd experienced with her parents.

We left my grandparents' house with four boxes full of belongings and only a note of farewell to explain our departure. Mom knew what they would say if she told them, and she didn't want to go through with that ever again. After a fifteen minute drive, I met Bill for the first time as he stood around the entry of the elegant cream-colored apartment building which was to be our new home. Looking tall and muscular as he escorted Mom out of the car, he smiled at me and said,

"Welcome to your new home, Mia. I'm sure you're going to love it here." However, he offered no such words to Mom, which might have been the first sign that something wasn't right. But at the time, I just smiled and said, "I sure will."

For a while, everything seemed okay. Mom and Bill appeared to be getting along, often talking for hours in the living room or going out to restaurants and movies during the weekends. Trips to the mall and the park became more common, and whenever I wanted something, they made sure I was able to get it. I started making a lot of friends in school, while also getting Mom to sign me up for choir and dance classes after school. Within time, I was spending as much time on playdates and after school activities as I was in my own home.

However, as the months went by, something changed. Mom and Bill started growing apart, remaining silent when I was around and avoiding each other's company whenever possible. Sometimes, Bill would give Mom an icy stare, and Mom would respond by glancing fearfully back, but would then walk off as if nothing had happened. If these tensions went on while I was at home, Mom would say, "Mia, would you like to play outside for a while?" and since I still went by those old rules, I always obeyed. Upon returning, I'd always find Mom wearing long-sleeved, black clothing, even if the apartment was heating up, and she'd tell me that Bill was going to spend the night with friends.

If I had been older, I might have suspected that something was going wrong. However, because I never heard anymore shouting while I was in bed, or witnessed someone being beaten, I thought any problems they had amongst themselves were under control, just as it was with many of my friends' parents. Also, Bill was never harsh towards me, so I took that as another sign that all was going well for us.

It would take me two years to discover how wrong I was.

One day, Mom appeared home from work at six. As usual, she was wearing a dark sweater despite it being the first warm day of the year. "Get ready, Mia," she called out. "We're going out for a walk."

"All right, Mom," I responded, putting my homework aside to come with her. For a while, we just walked around the neighborhood, watching kids running around and laughing in their backyards, adults sitting in their balconies and calling out to spouses or children to come join them, and teenagers gathered together in large groups, discussing plans for prom night and summer vacation. It seemed as if everyone was happy that night, with us two being the only somber people within sight.

After a couple of minutes, Mom got a hold of my hand and asked, "Mia, do you know why I told you it's so important to listen back when you were little?"

"Because by listening to the things people wanted me to do, you knew that I could make things easier for the both of us. It meant less trouble for you, and we

could spend more time together. If I didn't do this, I always felt as if I was lost," I tried to explain.

Mom nodded slowly. "Yes, I see. But the real reason I told you this was because that was the rule I'd been living by ever since I had you at the age of seventeen. Back then, I accepted the fact that I'd made a mistake by getting together with someone who was so careless, but I also thought it meant I deserved to be treated badly by my parents and rejected by my friends. As far as I knew, the only way I could gain everyone's approval was by always listening, no matter how harsh or unrealistic their expectations of me were. If I didn't, I thought I would do something reckless again, ending up just as lost as I was as a teenager. And... and this didn't stop when we left my parents."

Then, with tears in her eyes, she started pulling off her sweater, and for the first time, I saw all that she'd been hiding from me. On her left arm, there was a large, purple bruise forming the shape of a moon, and on the right arm, there appeared to be about a dozen scratches, some which already formed brown, disfiguring scars, and others that were still bright red, as if they were more recent. It served as a clear sign that she'd been suffering through abuse for a long time; that we had not really escaped when we went off with Bill.

"Did Bill do this?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

With her eyes towards the pink sky, Mom once again nodded. "I thought taking it was worth it at first, so you and I could have a stable home for once in our lives. Bill only seemed to have those angry outbursts occasionally, so I made myself believe this was better than getting berated by my own family every day. But now I know that I shouldn't have, that having someone to guide us along didn't mean we'd be heading in the right direction."

I remained silent. How could I have not thought about this? I had lead myself, over the years, to think that words could hurt a person more than stones; that if you weren't seeing or hearing others screaming or beating someone down, then everything was under control. But I had not been able to see through Bill and the abuse he'd put my mother through. I did not realize we were still in the same situation as we were before.

"But it's not going to happen ever again, Mia," Mom said, putting her arms around me. "We'll have to leave everything behind once again, and we may have to wander around for a while, having to find a new job and school, but we're not going to return home. You can't always listen to others to avoid getting lost, because the directions may lead you towards a darker path than you were before."

It was then that we finally got the chance to truly escape.